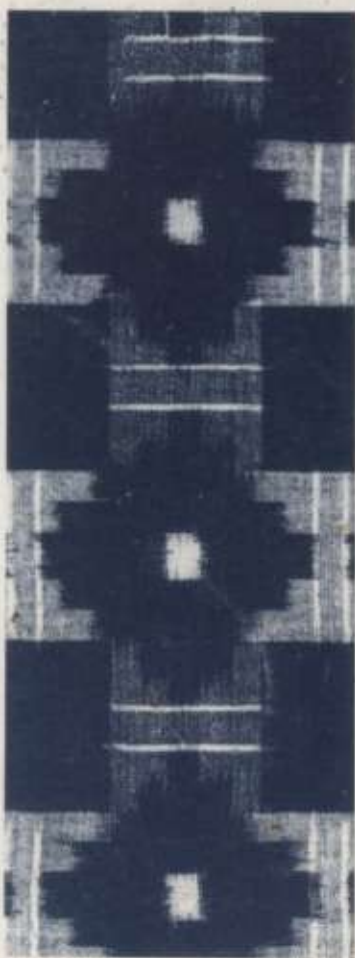


INDIGO TEXTILES

Japan-Laos-Nigeria



JAPAN



LAOS



NIGERIA

A touring exhibition organised by the
Crafts Councils Centre Gallery, Crafts
Council of New South Wales.

Drawn from the private collections of
Patricia Cheesman, Jennifer Isaacs and
Mary Taguchi.

Assisted by the Crafts Board of the
Australia Council and the Utah
Foundation.

INDIGO TEXTILES

Japan-Laos-Nigeria

A touring exhibition organised by the Crafts Councils Centre Gallery, Crafts Council of NSW. Assisted by the Utah Foundation and the Crafts Board of the Australia Council.

THIS exhibition is a unique focus on the ancient technique of indigo dyeing in the handspun and handwoven cloth of three countries. The indigo plants produce one of the oldest and most important dyes and the process survives in small pockets of Japan, Laos and Nigeria as an archaic expression of the indigenous culture.

Indigo is an extremely beautiful dye, imparting a particular richness, intensity, variety of hue and characteristic smell. It has been prized for its aesthetic beauty, ability to produce strong, durable cloth and the extraordinary subtlety of its colour. A large collection of indigo blue is a visual experience.

This exhibition does not seek to make a definitive statement on indigo textiles; no one exhibition could. Rather, the Crafts Councils Centre Gallery saw value in a well-documented exhibition of selected textiles presented, as far as possible, in their cultural context.

The works are drawn from three significant private collections of individuals with a particular love and knowledge of indigo. Mary Taguchi lived in Japan for some years and is a teacher of Japanese deeply involved in fostering a wide appreciation of Japanese arts and culture. Patricia Cheesman has worked in Laos as a United Nations ceramic advisor and collected textiles on frequent visits. Jennifer Isaacs lived for some time in Nigeria researching traditional arts and collected textiles in the local market places. The unique combination of cloth in this exhibition

reflects their appreciation of these rich cultures.

Textiles, cloth and clothing for practical and ceremonial purposes, are important elements in most societies. They can enhance our understanding of a culture, its rituals, symbols, codes and values. The complex indigo preparation and dyeing process is immersed in the social and cultural traditions of Japan, Laos and Nigeria. Each culture has its unique characteristics and diversities. This is apparent in the separate focus given to each group of textiles in this exhibition. The Japanese works are formal and modular, the Laotian more decorative and ornamental, the African bold and exuberant.

But there are also significant cross-references, such as the relative symbolic meanings and values of the indigo plant itself, of the colour blue, surface image and pattern, rites and ritual processes in preparation and making, and the cultural values associated with wearing and using the cloth.

This exhibition presents many exceptional items of cloth and clothing not shown in public before. It also shows some humble and everyday items. They have all been made by the people for a social purpose, utilitarian or ceremonial. As such they reflect the richness and vitality of a living culture. Above all, they capture the intrinsic and abiding beauty of indigo.

Anne Flanagan
Exhibition Officer/Curator



Above: Indigo dye vats presently in use in Ibaraki Ken
Top right: Lao woman dyeing thread outside her house, Vientiane Province. Tied threads create an ikat pattern when woven. The use of broken pottery jars for the 'nam nin' and working at floor level is typical of T'ai Lao.

Right: Hausa indigo dyeing compound, Kano, Northern Nigeria. The pits are up to 5 metres deep



This project was assisted by the Crafts Board of the Australia Council.

Japan

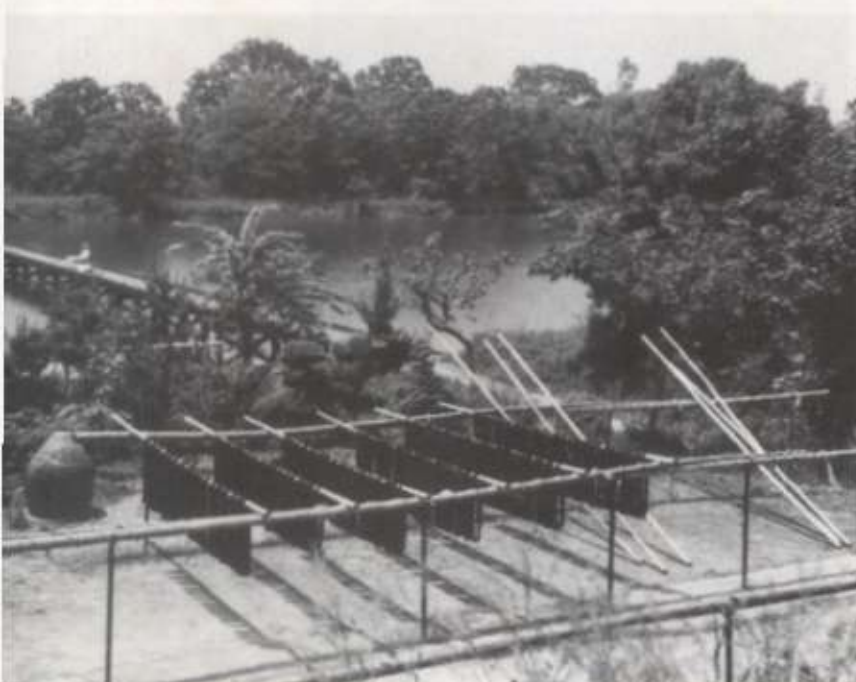
HISTORICALLY, blue is the colour of the Japanese people. Above all, it mirrors the colour of the vast ocean surrounding the Japanese islands, the ocean that has been the Mother Earth, provider of food. The *yukata* blue and white summer gown, the *tenugui* cloth worn as a headband, the *furoshiki* wrappers, the *noren* curtains, the workmen's *hanten* jackets — all have, for centuries, been traditionally blue and once all were dyed in indigo. Lafcadio Hearn commented on the omnipresent blue when he arrived in Japan in 1890. His first impressions are recorded:

'Elfish everything seems; for everything as well as everybody is small, and clear, and mysterious: the little houses under their blue roofs, little shop fronts hung with blue and smiling little people in their blue costumes ... through an interminable flutter of flags and swaying of dark blue drapery, all made beautiful and mysterious with Japanese and Chinese lettering, you observe that same rich, dark blue, dominating ...' (from *My First Day in the Orient*)

The blue that Hearn witnessed was the colour of indigo, a vegetable pigment that has the power to dye silk, hemp, cotton or paper several shades of blue.

Indigo, *ai*, is an ingredient contained in several kinds of plant. The most widely used plant is *Indigofera Anil* (Indian indigo). In the first century A. D. Indian indigo was introduced from India to Europe and used as a painting pigment. By the early 17th century indigo had become an important dye in Europe mainly because of its colouring strength. Several European countries had begun to cultivate indigo and continued to do so until the 19th century when a German chemist developed a synthetic indigo. As for Japan, from as early as the 17th century, indigo was an important dyestuff. By the beginning of the 17th century indigo was being cultivated commercially in Awa (now called Tokushima) in Shikoku Island and since then this area has been the major supplier of indigo in Japan.

Dyed and washed skeins of cotton drying before being woven into bolts of narrow cloth, Ibaraki Ken



Using the old method, natural indigo was first prepared by picking leaves and placing them in a bed of straw. Sprinkled with water and regularly turned, they would start to ferment in about five days. After repeating the process many times, the leaves would be left to dry. The end product, *sukumo*, would then be pounded and saturated with an ash solution. Balls of this, called *aidama*, were what the indigo merchant sold to the indigo dyer.

To make an indigo bath an ash solution was poured into an empty ceramic pot (about 150 cm high and 80 cm diameter) and *aidama* mixed into it. An added bran solution caused the mixture to ferment and after about six days the colour would turn dark blue. Another solution of ash lime and rice bran added to the pot completed the fermenting and the dye would then be ready. Dye baths have always been buried in the ground, four are in a set with a small centre hole for heating. Heating was needed in winter to help the fermentation process.

Nowadays, almost all indigo is manufactured by chemical processes from mineral oil and coal derivatives. Indigo dyes, however, generally use synthetic and natural indigo in combination. There are only a few dyers left who use just natural indigo and the old methods.

From the beginning, indigo was closely connected with the everyday life style of the Japanese people for several reasons: because of a suitable climate, indigo was widely available; the ammonia in indigo repelled snakes; the beauty was very appealing even as it faded and grew old; and, most importantly, cloth dyed in indigo was noticeably strengthened and hence made tough, suitable work clothing. Indigo dyed cloth is about ten percent stronger than undyed material; by dipping cloth many times in an indigo dye bath a layer of indigo is built up.

From the middle of the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), cotton cloth became increasingly popular and spread rapidly in use because it was cheap, practical and comfortable. Throughout the 250 years of the Tokugawa period, Japan withdrew into seclusion, having contact with other countries only through limited trading with the Dutch in Nagasaki and on a small scale with the Chinese. Some textiles were imported from China and the later development and popularity of striped patterns (*shima moni*) in Japan was undoubtedly due to the influence of these cloths. Suppressed by the military class, the *chonin*, townspeople, almost universally used cotton cloth for everyday wear. Well aware of the advantages of cotton (its softness, speed of spinning and ease of drying) these people used several techniques and easily obtainable indigo dye to produce excellent, durable fabrics.

Cotton has a relatively short history in Japan. Its cultivation began after Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592. Because cotton grows best in temperate climates, its cultivation in the northern areas was delayed. It began around the Inland Sea and then gradually spread throughout Japan. The material was greatly welcomed after the singular choice of expensive silk or ordinary *asa*. *Asa* is a broad term used for a wide range of fibres, even those of the

mulberry or nettle family. Being so close in texture to paper it is not hard to understand the appearance of clothes made of both fabric and paper (weft of cotton, warp of paper). Zest was poured into well designed, subtle woven stripes which didn't look extravagant at first glance but were full of beautiful colour combinations with indigo blue. Even people living in the cold northern districts bought cotton and wove it into stripes — being technically easy, it could be done even in the simplest weave — hence the use of a variety of striped designs (vertical, horizontal and checked) spread throughout Japan. The stripes were originally given specific names *sensuji* (thousand lines), *mijin jima* (tiny stripes), *komochi jima* (stripes with children), *taki jima* (waterfall stripes). So popular were these designs that the plain dark blue indigo was merely called *mekura jima*, or blind stripes — plain or patternless.

Not only these singularly geometric patterns, but graphic designs as well were used to enhance plain fabric. Simple methods of stencil dyeing, known as *katazome*, have been practiced in Japan for several centuries. First, a stencil was cut out on rice paper which had been strengthened with persimmon juice. The stencil was placed on a fabric, then a colour-resistant paste, originally made from glutinous rice, was applied all over the stencil so that the paste set onto the fabric through the stencil holes. After the paste had dried, vegetable dyes, or pigments, were applied with brushes to the areas that had been covered by the stencil. To complete the process, the fabric was finally dipped in water to remove the paste. Often, the paste was applied freehand, the starch resist again being used to prevent the dye from reaching areas that were to remain white. This *tsutsugaki* method allowed greater freedom of design and was mainly used for decorative *noren* curtains, banners, bedding, festival costumes and *furoshiki* cloth wrappers.

The sober geometric beauty of striped fabric clearly had a direct influence on *kasuri*, a weaving technique of major importance in Japanese cloth history. *Kasuri* is the Japanese term for ikat weaving, in turn the Indonesian term for a 'splashed' weave obtained by resist dyeing warp or weft or both. *Kasuri* comes from the verb *kasureru*, to blur, whereas the Indonesian 'ikat' means to tie or to bind. Fabrics with these splashed or scattered patterns are generally assumed not to be of Japanese origin but to have first appeared in the general area of South-east and Central Asia, centred on India. The technique made its way northward and in the 14th century reached Okinawa, one reason being the cultural currents (Okinawa's location near other South-east Asian counties brought more frequent cultural exchange and trade) and the other a social system which long demanded tribute in textiles instead of money or rice. Such cloths finally became known to people on the main island, Honshu, and by the 19th century the Japanese began to actively produce fabrics with exquisite splashed patterns.

The *kasuri* technique is a complex one of reserving certain areas by wrapping the threads before dyeing, in order to prevent the dye from penetrating. In the early days, *kasuri* patterns were worked out on a



Shima mono, cotton woven into stripes being an early, simple weave



Katazome, cotton resist dyed in indigo with a calligraphic stencil design



Katazome, cotton resist dyed in indigo with a complex stencil design of crane and *noshi* (a gift knot)



Hanten, indigo dyed jacket combining techniques of shibori (tie dye), sashiko (stitching) and kasuri (splashed weave)

Below: Kurume Kasuri, a combination of indigo dyed geometric and graphic kasuri. The crane is the traditional symbol of fortune and longevity

Opposite: Kurume Kasuri, geometric kasuri using two indigo dye colours, narrow fabric widths are joined together for a bedding cover

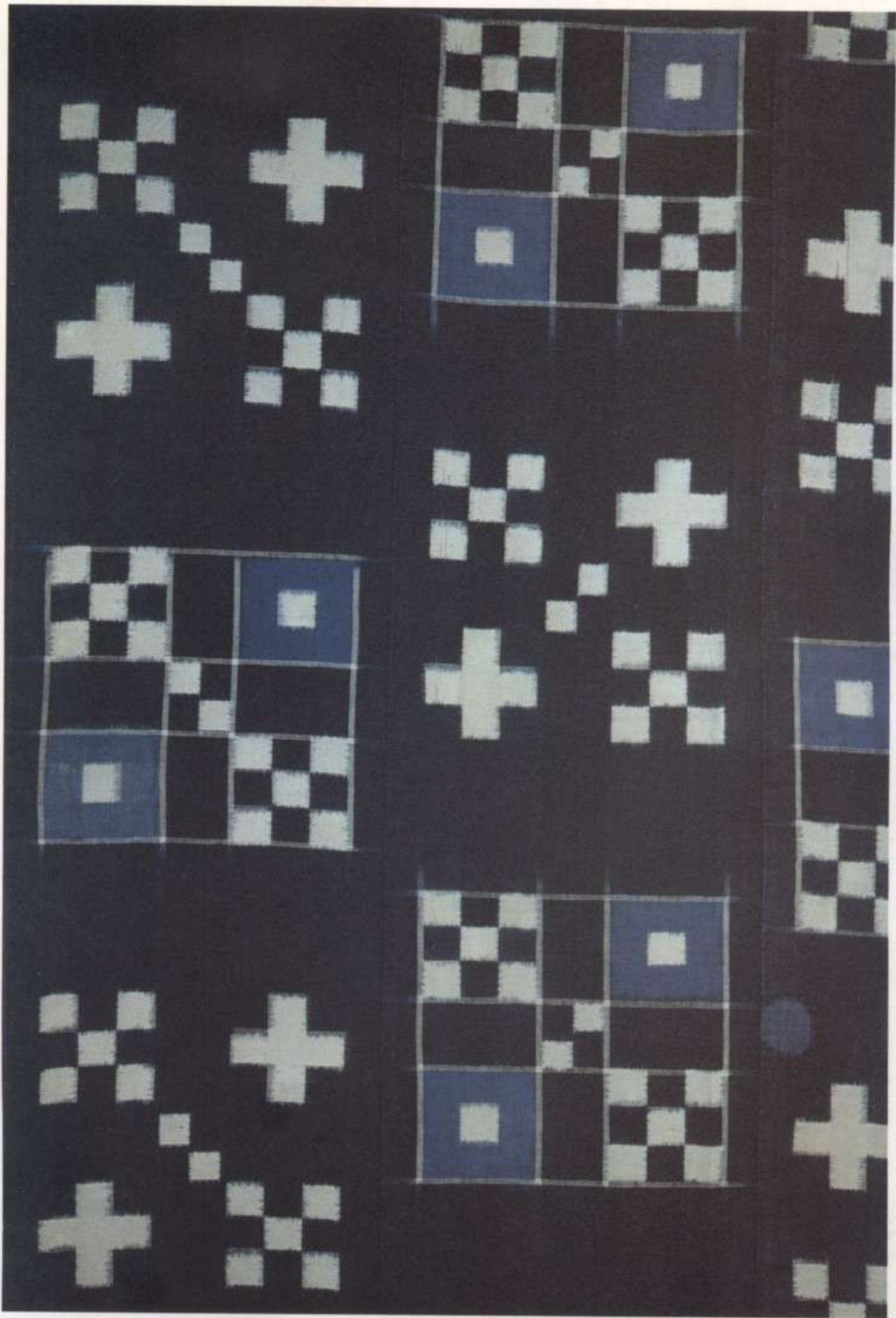
Japan



graph to calculate the sections of yarn to be dyed. The warp and weft yarns were strung on racks in the same order as they would appear on the loom and the patterns marked on them. After being tied tightly with hemp they would then be dyed. A little of the dye would always, unavoidably, penetrate at the edges of the wrappings, hence the irregular merging of the white reverse into the ground colour, the most characteristic feature of the *kasuri* textiles.

Traditionally, the dye used was indigo. The skeins of yarn were immersed in progressively darker vats of dye, some 20 to 30 times altogether. After each dip they were flailed on a stone floor to expose all the yarn to air to spread the dye evenly. In the subsequent weaving, whenever the undyed areas of a weft yarn and a warp yarn crossed, a white area appeared. To be successful, the weaver had to constantly check the pattern, pulling it tighter or giving more slack as required. When hand-dyed and handwoven like this, one bolt of cloth (roughly 12 metres) could take nearly one month to complete. Present day machine woven *kasuris* are seldom dyed in pure indigo for the cost would be formidable. One solution has been to give a final dunking in the indigo vat to give the smell and colour of the real thing.

Kasuri designs which follow geometric patterns, owe their origin largely to textile techniques, notably to the methods themselves of weaving which were originally earthy and very primitive. *Kasuri* patterns are generally made up of geometric figures in various combinations of crosses, squares and lattices (combinations of horizontal and vertical stripes). The strong effect of lattices made *kasuri* popular with the military class in the early fourteenth century. Traditionally, the colour and size of *kasuri* designs varied according to the rank of the person who wore the garment. Pictures of early 20th century Japan show young children clad in *kasuri*



Japan

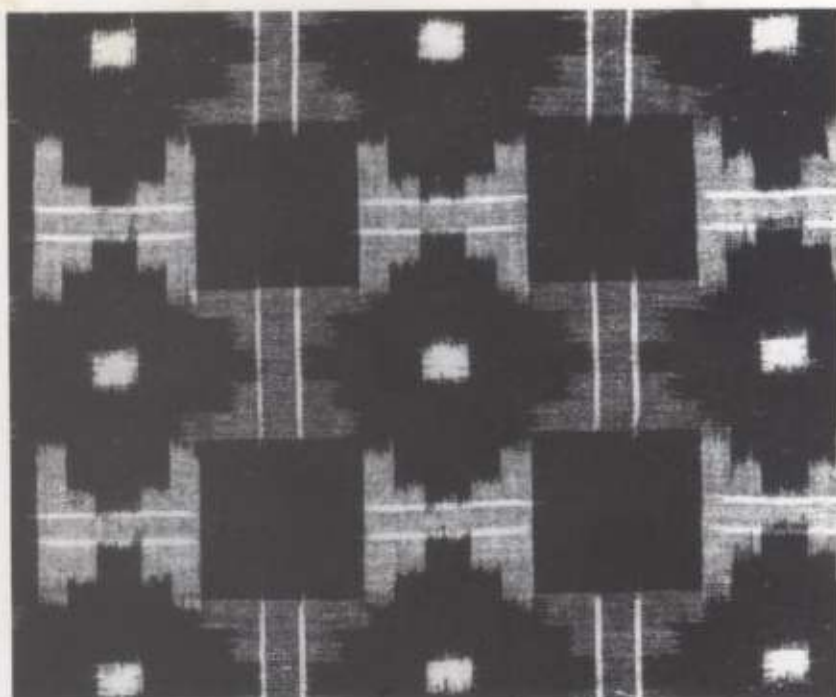
and university students proudly posing in uniform of *kasurikimono*, *hakama* pants and *geta* shoes. *Kasuri* for ordinary kimono was woven of linen or cotton and almost all farmers used to have looms with which the women could weave. No matter what design techniques were applied to or woven into cottons, the width of Japanese fabric has always been a narrow 36 cm and the length 11.8 metres. The width represents half one's body and the length exactly makes a kimono, the surplus in length being taken up by folding at the waist. Cutting of fabric is crucial and exacting so that there is virtually no waste. A kimono would start its life as a very good piece of clothing, then become a house garment and in time cut for children's wear or working clothes and lastly be used as dust cloths. Handwoven material was strong and hard wearing, often lasting for generations and becoming more beautiful with every wash.

Irregular patterns in *Kasuri* have also existed and a further development, *e-gasuri* (graphic *kasuri*) involved the use of a stencil, making preparation of the weft yarn a long process, yet designs of great intricacy were then possible. Some areas of Japan have specialised in different elaborate *kasuri* for hundreds of years, such as *Kurume Kasuri* from Kyushu's Ehime Prefecture and *Iyo Kasuri* from Ehime, Shikoku. In *e-gasuri*, most designs are derived from symbolic motifs employed in the fine arts of Kyoto and other cultural centres, the most usual being the various symbols of fortune and longevity — bamboo, the pine tree, carp, tortoise and crane. All motifs were highly suitable for wedding robes and decorations. Whether geometric or graphic *kasuri*, or a combination of both, *kasuri* has long been used for a number of household items as well as kimono; *futon*, Japanese bedding that consists of two thin mattresses wadded with cotton and covered with *kasuri*; *zabuton*, cushions to sit on, also wadded with cotton and covered with *kasuri*; *forushiki*, squares of material used as wrappers; *noren*, short doorway curtains used for shop fronts and between rooms in houses. In recent years, special antique pieces of *kasuri* have been used for screens, cushions, decorative wall hangings, or remade into their original use as bedding covers.

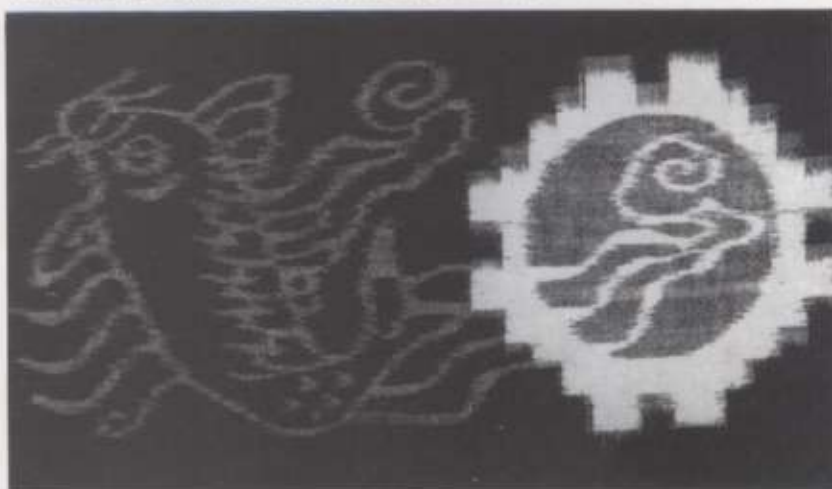
The coat shown in this catalogue is an excellent example of a combination of various fabric techniques. Two layers of cotton cloth have been stitched together, by hand, in a technique called *sashiko*. Both the outside and the lining are tie dyed, *shibori*, and the welted sections, front and back, are handwoven, hand-dyed *kasuri*. *Sashiko* stitching originally began as a means of strengthening or repairing parts of clothing that received heavy duty wear. This stitching technique developed over the years into a much admired folk art. During the Tokugawa period, firemen began to use thick *sashiko* jackets as their uniform and the tradition for wearing this strong fabric can still be seen today in the jackets for *Judo* and *Kendo* — a simple, yet powerful and decorative effect.

All cloths in this exhibition belong to working people, to farmers. Of strong cotton, varying techniques and strengthened with indigo dye, they are typical of those that have been part of farming life for centuries and even today represent the style of fabric still favoured in Japan's rural areas.

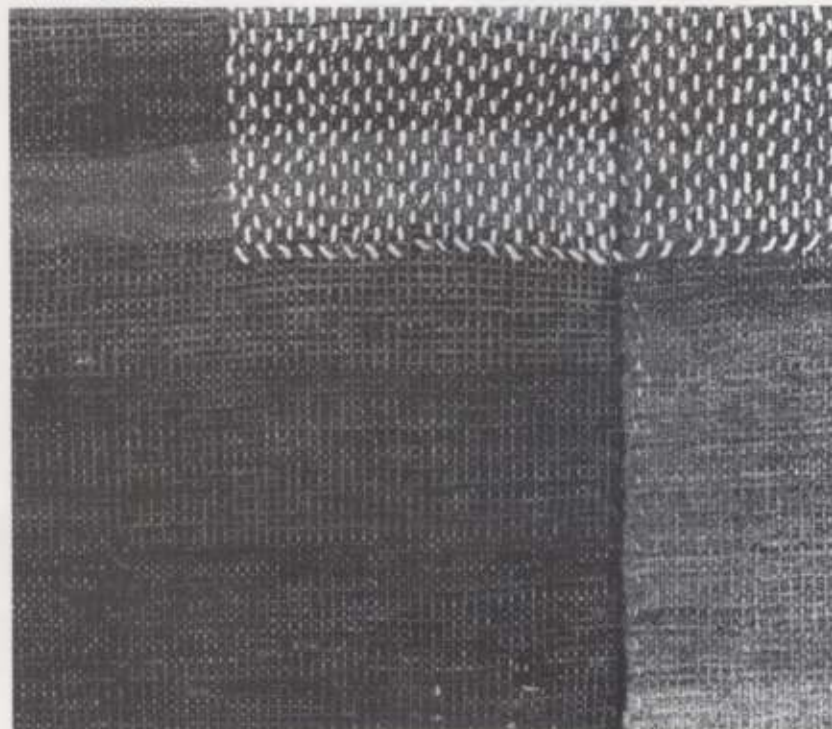
Mary Taguchi



Kurume Kasuri, handwoven geometric *kasuri* made up of fine stripes and squares



Kurume Kasuri, a combination of geometric and graphic *kasuri* depicting a carp, symbol of fortune



Sashiko, a plain stitch used to welt, strengthen or repair parts of cloth. The textile uses 'saki ori', finely torn strips of cloth woven with linen

LAOS is a small country squeezed between China, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Thailand and Burma. Her population is very varied with many ethnic groups each with its own sub-groups and dialects, each inhabiting specific types of land. She is the cross-roads of S. E. Asia. The Silk Road passed through her northern corner and opium routes criss-cross her difficult terrain. In Nam Tha alone for example, it is estimated that forty languages are spoken among its population of approximately 155,000.

For Laos there is no one particular style that can qualify as a national identity, but rather a complicated interplay of ideas from tribe to tribe, each influencing the other over a very long period of time. One thing that does occur in all the groups is their use of indigo as a main dye for cloth.

It is generally accepted that the Mon-Khmer group was the first to inhabit the area and that the first of the Tai groups to come down from Southern China was the Tai Leu followed by the Tai Lao, Tai Neua, Tai Dum, Tai Deng, Tai Muoi, Tai Thai (who went on down into Siam and are the Thai of Thailand) and many others. The Tai groups pushed the Mon-Khmer groups south and forced them to live in the hills away from the fertile valleys. The last group to move south from Yunnan was the Meo-Yao group, and they took the middle slopes of the hills to grow opium. This is a nomadic group living a "slash and burn" style of existence, with numerous tribes each with their own dialect and individual style. The Hmong are one of these tribes.

Thus, as you can imagine, to represent Lao textiles is not the aim of this collection from Laos, but rather the common use of indigo by the Tai Leu, Tai Lao, Tai Neua and the Hmong, all of whom have settlements not only in Laos but also in Thailand, China, Burma, Kampuchea and Vietnam. The cloths shown in this exhibition have been collected between 1973 and 1981 and represent some of the best examples of the traditional cloths as they were before the revolution in 1975. Some of the pieces are as old as 100 years and have been handed down from generation to generation. Some of these techniques will never be repeated.

Today's existing political boundaries were drawn up by the French at the end of the last century in their attempt to create an organised Indo-China. These borders do not restrict the tribes in the way that it is generally expected, nor do they divide the land according to the ethnic groupings. For example, only one fifth of the ethnic Lao actually live in Laos. Four fifths live in N. E. Thailand in an area known as the Korat Plateau. The ethnic Lao are becoming very scattered as a result of the revolution in 1975. Some 5000 Lao now live in Sydney, having come here as refugees. The area from which they came is in flux and as a result of these changes, many traditions are being lost. However, with change there is also some growth. The closure of the borders has made it very difficult for the Lao to import threads or dyes for weaving. Thus, since 1975, a return to the ancient methods of dying and weaving is being experienced. The general styles have undergone some rather drastic changes, and the government is attempting to create a national style at the same time as discouraging the individual



styles of the varied peoples of Laos. However, we may well find some exciting new designs emerging from this unique situation.

Indigo is one of the first dyes to see a come-back. As a base colour for nearly all their practical garments in the past, the different groups are now replanting and using indigo. It has been used in this part of the world for centuries, but is not seen as a special colour, but rather as a practical one; easy to prepare (relatively speaking) and practical for work clothes because it does not show the dirt. Other natural dyes are much harder to prepare, taking longer and the plants being rare. The indigo only takes one season to grow which is important to nomadic tribes.

There are two plants which yield indigo colour — the *Kham* tree and the *Hom* tree. They are in fact more like bushes which are cultivated for their dye only. Unlike Africa, the Lao prepare their dyes individually, each family preparing for their own needs. This is because the population is so small and scattered that there is no surplus labour. The woman prepares the dye and weaves the cloth for her immediate family. That is all she can manage. It is not an easy life living in those particular climatic and environmental circumstances. It is subsistence level farming and the hardship is only broken by festivals and ceremonies. For these she may weave some special pieces for which she will not use indigo unless it is combined with something extra, like silk or appliqué work.

Indigo is used as an everyday colour; the farmers' clothes are all indigo, the men's pants, sarongs, shirts are indigo; the women wear indigo shirts with ikat sarongs or in the case of the Hmong, batik with indigo. The Hmong men wear all black (the darkest indigo) which is only broken by the silver of a torque or earring.

The preparation of the dye is very seasonal. In the fifth month, when the rains begin, the seeds are sown. After six months the rains have ceased and the weather is cool and dry. The plants are cut at the base and submerged in water in ceramic jars for three days. After four nights the leaves have started to break down and are crushed in the water by hand. The pieces of plant are removed as they disintegrate and lime is added to the black water. The lime is mixed to a paste before adding to avoid lumps. The amount of lime added is crucial and can be judged by the colour of the water and the nature of the bubbles. The water must go reddish and the bubbles must go black.

The mixture is then left to settle for two days and the excess water taken off the top. The sludge or sediment is called *nam nin* and is then mixed with lye.

Lao woman weaving indigo ikat cloth, Vientiane Province. Her standing loom is situated in the cool under the house where she can watch the children and talk to passers by



Laos

The lye is prepared as a mordant by washing ash from the cooking fire in a bamboo sieve. The quantity of lye to *nam nin* is very important. Too much lye is too caustic which will result in corroded cloth and too little will not give the dark effect required. Threads or lengths of cloth are dyed with the paste, dipping the pieces at least six times. The pieces are repeatedly dyed and dried to achieve the richest colour. The cloth or threads are only rinsed after the first and last dipping when they are rinsed until the water runs clear. Sometimes cloth is steamed in a large rice steamer with tamarind leaves to make the dyes extra fast.

The **Tai Leu** are considered by the Lao to be the most creative of the peoples in Laos, with skills in all the fields of the crafts including pottery, weaving basketware and design. Possibly the first Tai group to come into Laos, they have now become very integrated in the Tai Thai style of living, adopting not only their dress but also their architecture and religion. The Tai Leu textiles exhibited here are very rare and show their extraordinary weaving skills. The looms used were standing looms and a method of supplementary weave (or weft brocade) was used to

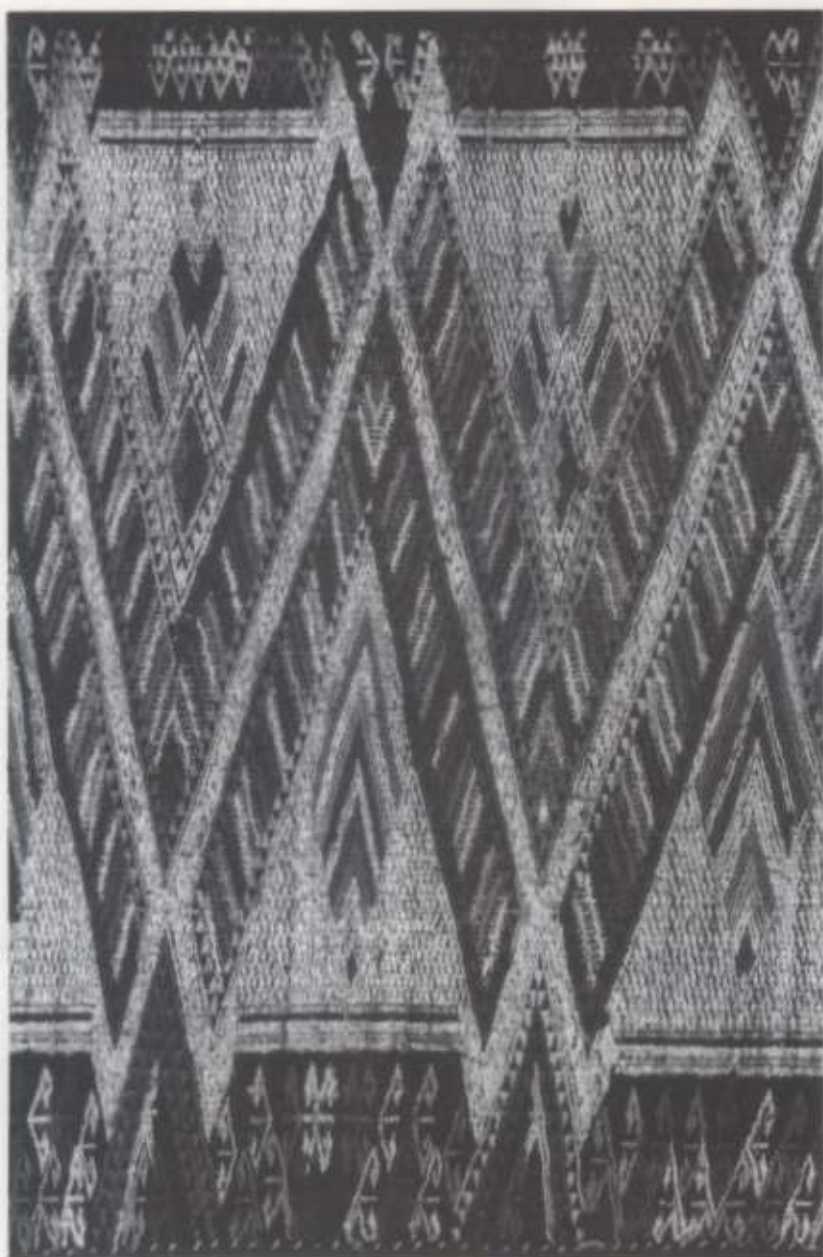
Left: Tai Lao modern design in ikat and supplementary weave techniques. Above: Tai Lao ikat sarong length. Traditional pattern using only a thin strip of red to enhance the indigo and white

Opposite: Lao Neua shawl with human and anthropomorphic figures entwined. The 'naga' or river dragon is featured with broken border of 'raga singh' or long-nosed lion creating a zig zag pattern. The combination of different types of weave create areas of varying depth and emphasis

add the pattern to the indigo base. In this case the base is cotton and the weft brocade is silk. Indigo is not used to create dark colours on silk because the process corrodes the threads and the silk does not take the dye well. The pale green colour of some of the silks has been achieved using another colour with indigo without using the strong lye mordant. The Tai Leu designs have influenced both the Tai Neua and Tai Lao very strongly. The main feature of these designs is the elongated diamond shape. This is the *douang tda* or third eye.



Laos

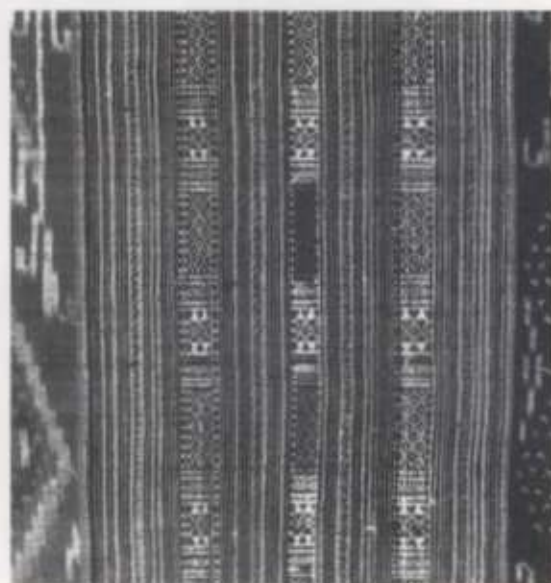
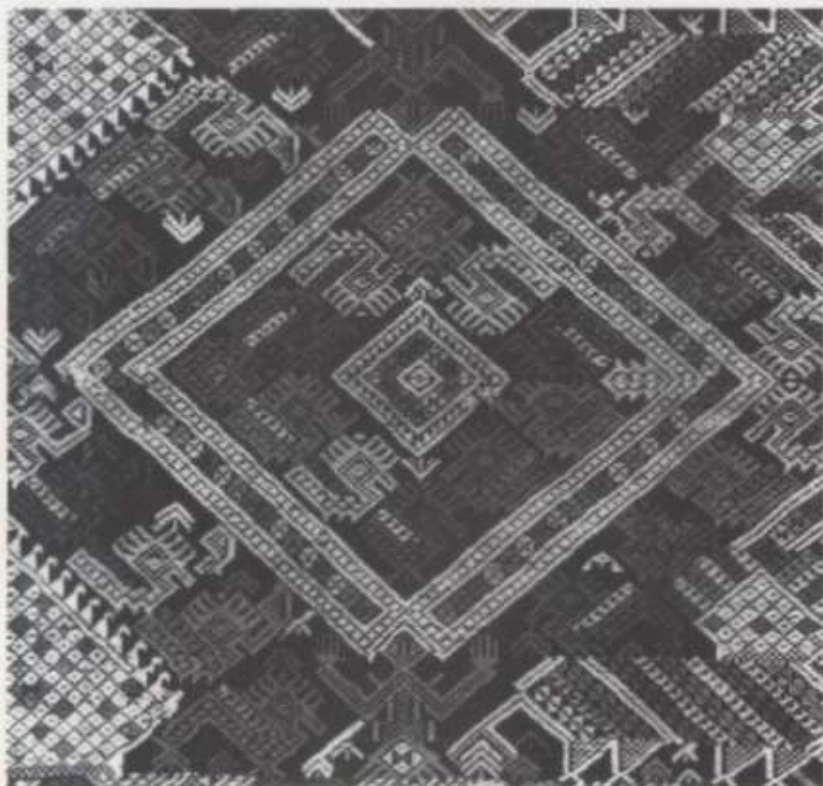


The **Tai Lao** are the largest group in Laos and inhabit the regions with the most fertile land. The cloths represented in this exhibition are nearly all ikat pieces and are examples of everyday clothing. A long history of disputes and fights among the princes of Luang Phrabang in the north, Vientiane in the centre and Pakse in the south has weakened the power of the Lao as a nation and due to their geographical setting mainly along the banks of the Mekong River, their styles have been very strongly influenced by the Tai Thai. However, there is a distinct quality to the Lao work which can be distinguished from the Thai. The pattern is finer and the thread hand spun. Before the revolution in Laos in 1975 only the old people would wear the traditional ikat *sind* or cotton sarong. Often a Lao woman would wear two or three *sind* using the oldest one on the outside for work, and if friends dropped in she could put the newest one on the outside in a flash. This also meant that the newer *sind* were protected and that the torn old ones were not thrown away until they completely fell apart.

The ikat is traditionally tied with strips of the outer shell of a banana tree stem. The cotton weft threads, having been carefully strung up on a frame exactly the width of the loom, are tied off in tens and dozens to achieve the ikat patterns. The tied white threads are dyed in the indigo paste and after the repeated dyeing and drying process, the ties are removed revealing the white pattern below. The threads are then wound onto bamboo spools and used for weaving on a standing loom. The warp threads are dyed solid indigo and the ikat pattern adjusted by the weaver as she weaves by pulling the warp threads along one edge.

Patterns vary a lot and do not seem to have any particular meaning, probably lost in time. The more

Above: Tai Leu sarong showing the intricate wide border woven into plain indigo cloth. Left: Lao Neua meditative piece. Anthropomorphic and human figures appear which centralize a diamond representing the 'third eye'. Below: Lao Neua sarong. Alternate bands of ikat and supplementary weave are arranged vertically in traditional sarongs.



subdued patterns are worn by the older women leaving the brighter ones for the unmarried women. Plain indigo shirts would have been worn traditionally with a silver belt around the waist. The Lao men have an indigo and white checked sarong which can be pulled between the legs and tucked in the back at the waist, thus looking rather like shorts. They would wear a long sleeved shirt for ceremonies which had cloth buttons.

The Tai Neua come from an area around Sam Neua, a valley in the north-east of Laos near the Vietnamese border. For many centuries the people were isolated from the changes of western civilisation and prospered by trading with China in a black resin from a tree which was used by the Chinese for lacquer ware. The Tai Neua developed their own very rich culture and retained the Mahayana form of Buddhism while the Tai Lao and Tai Thai became Theravada Buddhists. The Tai Neua used geometrical and abstract patterns in their weavings and maintained a close understanding of the symbols. These pieces are very rare, in particular the pieces using indigo as a base colour. Here the indigo is enhanced and transformed from an everyday colour to a suitably rich background for their intricate brocade or supplementary weave techniques. The designs represent anthropomorphic figures from their folk tales and metaphysical structures such as the third-eye. In this case, the diamond pattern or third-eye was often woven into the central part of a piece and used to focus on in meditation. Buddhism allowed a certain adaptation of ancient animistic beliefs to co-exist and for one ceremony a year their red shawls would have been folded in such a way as to centralise the diamond and tie the shawl on the head in the position of the third eye. This ceremony involved the spirits who would come for a party and leave satisfied until the following year.

All the pieces incorporating supplementary weave were used by the Tai Neua in festivals and other special occasions. There is one everyday sarong displayed which shows the use of indigo in an intricate ikat design. Also a *sind* or sarong which incorporates the use of ikat and supplementary weave. This is a classic example of Tai Neua style with alternate panels of red and indigo ikat divided by the panels of supplementary weave.

The Hmong belong to the Meo-Yao ethnic group. Their use of indigo is very specialised. They have a method of batik which involves using a small stick as the main line maker. The stick is dipped in the wax and pressed on the cloth. A tiny geometrical pattern results with no curved lines at all. Applique is sewn onto this basic structure usually using bright pink or bright green cloth imported from China. This type of indigo batik is used for making pleated skirts for the women and also baby carriers. Plain indigo cloth is used for the men's shirts and pants. The Hmong are a nomadic group and thus do not have much time to plant and harvest the indigo, although the structure of their lives is built around the cultivation of the poppy. Their looms are backstrap looms and their thread either hemp or wild cotton. For this reason, their cloth is usually very narrow. The pieces shown in the exhibition are rare because they are wide, having been ordered specially by the author in 1978.

Indigo was the most common dye used in S. E. Asia before the introduction of packet dyes. The colour is rich and comforting. It is an old colour loved by the people. In Laos its use varies from a pale blue to a deep black. The young generation no longer know how to make it. Perhaps its use would have been completely forgotten, but I doubt it. There are still Lao people who prefer to use the traditional cloths and with the present situation there, perhaps it will remain the most practical and most used colour among the farmers.

Patricia Cheesman



Above: Tai Lao ikat sarong. Before weaving areas of the patterned weft are tied with strips of banana stem woven with the supplementary weave technique

Right: Lao Neua blanket supplementary weave technique. This 'closed key' design together with the 'open key' design are favourites for blankets



Below: Hmong batik cloth. The end of a stick is dipped in wax to create the tiny resist pattern. No curved lines appear



Nigeria

NIGERIA is a country of incredible contrasts. Lagos, the steamy capital is a maze of freeways perpetually clogged with stationary traffic, flashy limousines compete with clapped out 'mammy' wagons stuffed with villagers commuting from outlying places, and the noise of the competition, excitement and aggression of the most populous country in Africa is deafening. Oil has produced a dominant rich class, yet economic contrasts are everywhere. Villagers till the ground around their communal homes, termed compounds, grow yams, cassava and plantain and struggle to keep up with the inflationary prices at local markets.

Every Yoruba town was once a centre of weaving and dyeing. Women made all the cloth needed in the family

and sold the excess, whereas men, with the introduction of imported yarns, set up guilds and engaged in manufacture of the cloth for trade to a much greater extent. Cloth produced on the wide women's loom was used for wrappers, togas, blankets and baby wrappers. Textiles produced on the narrow men's looms are used as women's skirt wrappers, women's head ties and also for the generous and ostentatious men's gowns and trousers.

During the boom of the 1960s, and for much of the 1970s, the affluent middle class in Nigeria distained the simplest hand crafted products of their country cousins, seeking clothes of gilt and lace and other more ostentatious features of the western world. Village hand weavers embellished their cloth with lurex

Hausa stitch-resist indigo dyed fabric drying in the sun between dippings. Kano, Northern Nigeria



Below: Yoruba woman bargains in Ibadun market. Her cloth is handwoven indigo strips, called 'aso-awe' with brocade patterned overweave

JENNIFER ISAACS



Opposite page:

Top left: Hausa woman's wrapper. Indigo and natural hand spun cotton cloth woven on upright loom

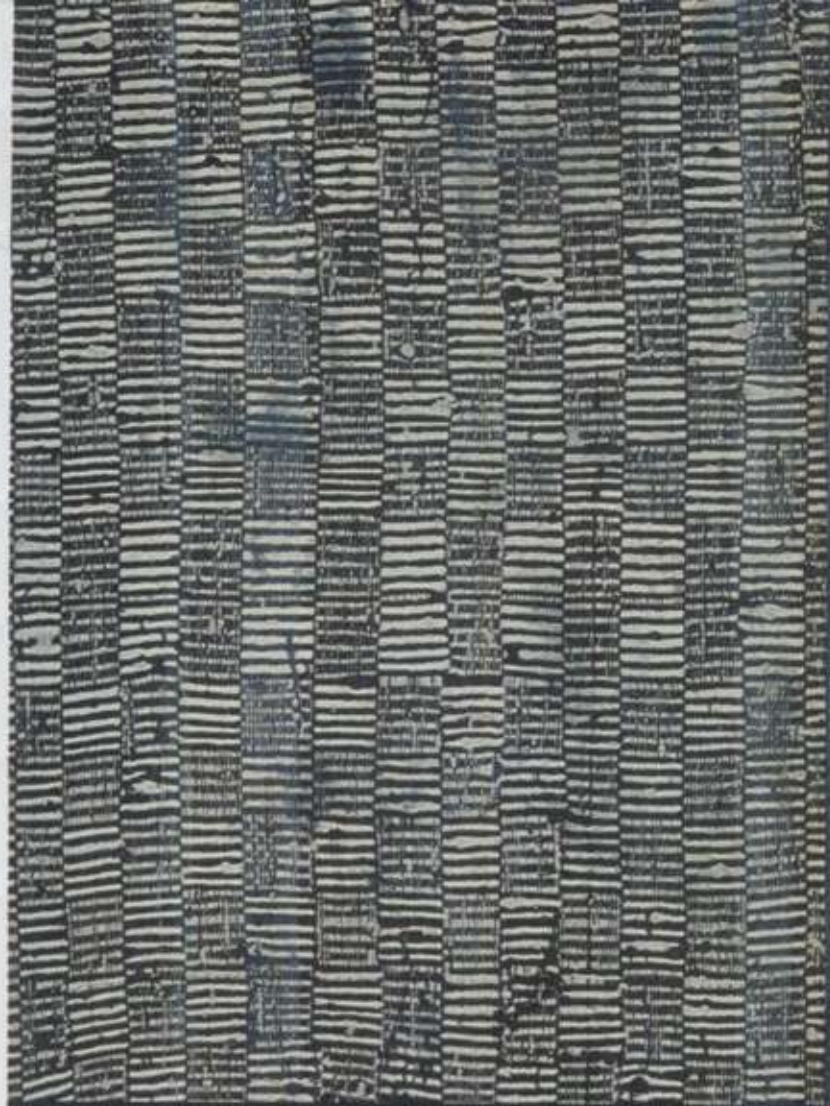
Top right: Yoruba woman's wrapper. Hand spun indigo dyed cotton woven in strips on men's horizontal loom. Magenta warp strip

Bottom left: Yoruba woman's wrapper. Machine spun cotton, dyed with indigo and hand woven in strips on horizontal loom. Brocade over-weave

Bottom right: Hausa woman's wrapper. Indigo and natural hand spun cotton cloth woven on upright loom

thread in an effort to compete with the imported status bestowing foreign cloths, but many looms were silenced. Village potters also slowed production as enamel ware from England flooded the country. In recent years this has changed somewhat. In common with other Third World countries, which went through a cultural upheaval following independence, educated Nigerians are now looking carefully at their indigenous art and culture, seeking to encourage and promote it as part of the national heritage.

This collection of indigo cloth is representative of three Nigerian communities — Yoruba, Hausa and Fulani. The Yoruba have lived for centuries in large towns, each numbering 70,000 to 200,000. Voluble and flamboyant, the Yoruba still uphold their traditional shrines with the many *orishi* or gods, although the Islamic influence is strong. Traditional crafts are many, including pottery, weaving and dyeing. The architecture and philosophy of the Hausa of northern Nigeria represent the prevailing Islamic beliefs. Men are the embroiderers, tailors, weavers and dyers, women remaining in *purdah* behind walled



cities. The Fulani are nomadic people whose countries and travels extend throughout the arid portions of northern Nigeria, through Niger and across to Ethiopia. The Fulani own herds of goats and are known throughout the Nigerian markets for the sale of milk and cheese which they carry on their heads in magnificent large decorated calabashes (gourds).

Indigo is the most common traditional dye in West Africa and is used for dyeing hand-spun cotton as well as *adire* patterned cloth. The early 17th century Portuguese, Dutch and English traders who visited West Africa commented that the villages were a vision of indigo blue cloth amongst the ochre brown of the mud houses. Plain blue indigo cloths, natural off-white woven cloths, together with blue and white striped indigo cloths were traded along the west African coast as well as to Brazil and Europe. Indigo is still an important traditional dye.

In Nigeria the source of indigo is a vine called *elu* (*Lonchocarpus cyanescens*) by the Yoruba. These vines are cultivated by women around their house compounds. The plant is gathered and pounded in large vessels until it forms a pulp. The pulp is then formed into fist-sized balls which are dried in the sun and finally wrapped in leaves for storage or sale. In order to release the indigo dye, or indoxyl, the plant must first ferment and then be mixed in an alkaline solution which is obtained from ash. Indigo dyeing in West Africa is always a specialist activity. Amongst the Yoruba it is the prerogative of women known as *Alaro*, whereas amongst the Hausa, the indigo dyers are all men. In the mid 19th century the city of Kano, capital city of the Hausa, north of Nigeria, had up to 2,000 dye pits. The Hausa still dig very large pits in the ground and line them with cement. These pits are

approximately 1.2 metres in diameter and up to 4.5 to 6 metres deep.

The preparation of the ash, termed *lamu lamu*, is a separate skill and the ash is generally sold to the dyer by other old women in the village. A kiln is built of mud about 1.2 metres high and 1.2 metres wide which has an opening in the top section about 300 mm below the top with a perforated mud shelf. At ground level a hole in the side is made through which the kiln can be fired. Short lengths of very green wood are placed across the perforated shelf together with moulded lumps of exhausted wood ash from previous dyeings. The kiln is fired for 10 to 12 hours and left to cool. The ashes of the green sticks and the ash balls which covered them form the ash to be used in the new dye stuff. Two large pots are placed on top of one another, the bottom one being dug into the ground to stop it falling over. A hole is made in the side of the lower pot. The top pot has a hole in the bottom covered with a sieve. Some of the ash balls are broken and mixed and placed upon the sieve. Water is added and drips through to the pot below taking some of the ash with it.

Filtered ash water forms the basis for the dye pot and is mixed with the indigo dye balls. Fifty to 100 balls can be used in a single large dye pot and the colours can range from pale blue through to deep indigo blue to intense blue-black. The *aloro* tastes the dye to see if it is ready. The whole dyeing procedure is, of course, cold and involves immersing yarn or cloth for several minutes then suspending it above a draining-board which leads back to the pot. Cloth or yarn is dipped up to five times and each time it is put into the sun to dry. This is repeated until the desired colour is produced. When first removed from the pot the dye colour is pale blue-green, but deepens quickly with exposure to the sun. Eventually, all the dye is absorbed into the cloth and the water which remains is used for moulding further ash balls to use in the ash making process. The Yoruba are fond of loading the cloth with excess dye. When dry, the cloth is then beaten with a mallet over a wooden log which imparts a metallic sheen to the cloth surface. The Yoruba find aesthetic beauty in the way that excess indigo rubs off onto their black skin and gleams in the sun. At any time during the process the dye can easily become inactive or "tired". The cloth must be removed at this point and the dye allowed to rest or the whole batch will be spoilt. Dyeing activity takes place mostly in the dry season and women dyers are praised if they can keep the dye active for a long time.

Early this century synthetic indigo and chemical mordants were introduced to West Africa and these quickly superseded the laborious process of growing and pounding local dye stuff. The imported products quickened the process of dyeing, however the women dyers found that the colour was less fast and the caustic soda used as a mordant rotted the cloth. In 1929 the King of the town of Abeokuta tried to forbid the use of caustic soda, but the women continue to use this substance today in some forms of dyeing. Amongst the most skilled dyers traditional *elu* indigo is prized, however imported indigo dye is also used. Traditional dyes are considered superior, not only because they are faster, but because of the incomparable richness and warmth of the colour attained. Indigo is used to dye patterned textiles known as *adire* or hand-spun cotton thread which is then woven into cloth.

In Nigeria the women work on a vertical loom and predominantly weave with hand-spun cotton, although raffia is occasionally used. The threads are doubled over the top and bottom warp beams. As the work slowly progresses the finished cloth is slipped down over the lower warp beam and up the back, thus keeping the shed and shuttle at approximately chest level. Cloths frequently exhibit simple warp stripes of

Yoruba 'adire' printed indigo cloth. Stencil design is called 'eyepe' many birds. Starch made from cassava is used to resist dye the design. Stencils are used until the letters can no longer be read



indigo and white. The weft may be monochrome but if the warp and weft are striped a plaid will result. The men use a narrow horizontal loom which has a warp of great length. Two heddles are used with a reed for beating the cloth. Up to 20 men may sit in a long open-fronted shed with their machine-spun cotton warps stretching out some 12 metres before them. This technique produces a very long, narrow strip of cloth about 100 mm in width. The strips are later cut up into lengths and sewn into square pieces of cloth. Bundles of unsewn strips may also be sold on the market.

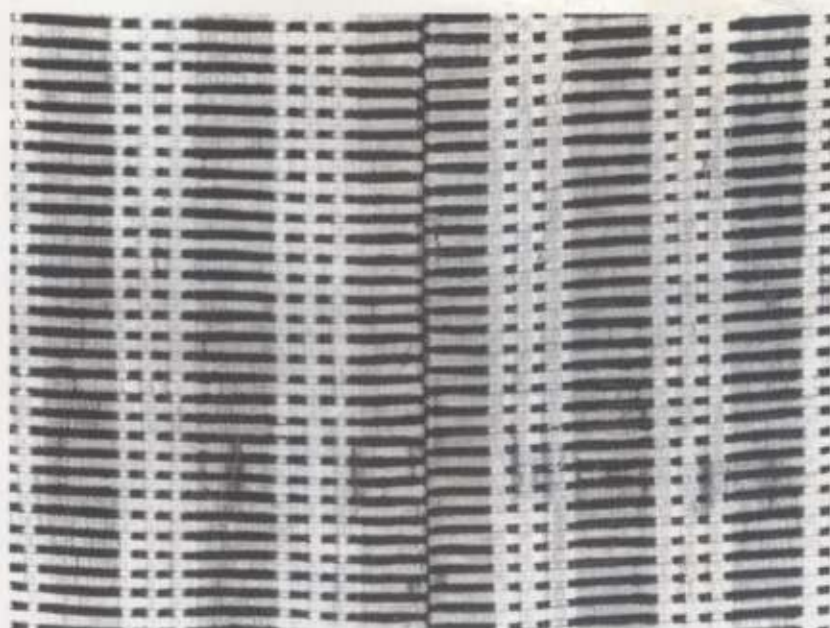
Yoruba traditional clothing adapts itself well to the use of square lengths of cloth; traditional gowns could be easily constructed from the strips. The Yoruba *agbada* men's gown is basically a piece of cloth folded over and sewn into a square. A hole is cut in for the head and openings are left at the side for the arms. Additional wedges of cloth are inserted at the base of the garment allowing it to fall in rich folds and to flare widely when dancing.

Techniques of decorating cloth using resist techniques have been in practice in West Africa for centuries and are still seen in many West African countries. In Nigeria the Yoruba, Ibo, Tiv, and Hausa all produce tie-dyed cloth. The simplest Yoruba *adire* cloth is tie-dyed *adire oniko* patterned in circles or concentric circles. Each cowrie-like element is produced by pressing the finger through the cloth and binding it with raffia or cotton. The tiny point made over the finger is twisted before tying. The cloth is tied by women and then taken to the *Alare* for dyeing.

The second technique of patterning cloth is termed *aladire alabere*. On these, elaborate designs are produced by stitching the material tightly into patterns, thus preventing the invasion by the dye. Such cloths are extremely old in origin and this technique was used on hand-spun and woven cloth as well as imported cotton cloth. Designs are made with cotton on sewing machines or by hand sewing with lengths of raffia or grass.

A type of batik effect is produced using cassava paste, and termed *adire eleko*. Cassava paste can be applied to the surface of imported machine-spun and woven cotton cloth in two ways: spreading the paste through a stencil and painting it on with a brush or a fine quill. Cassava starch is used to resist the dye much the same as wax is used in batik. Square stencils are prepared by men and originated in the town of Abeokuta where zinc or lead sheets were ripped off packing boxes used for importing goods. A paste is made from cassava flour bought in Yoruba markets, termed *lafun*. *Lafun* and alum are boiled together and when the suspension reaches a certain consistency it is rapidly beaten, congealing to form a thick glutinous starch. The starch must be turgid in order to prevent it sinking into the weave, or flowing beneath the stencil.

Adire eleko is made on white shirting of varying textures and different stencils may be used on the one cloth. The starch is spread into the open areas of the stencil and when the stencil is lifted the design remains on the cloth. When the starch dries it hardens and the cloth can then be dipped in the cold dye several times until the desired blue is reached; the cassava paste is then scraped off. This cloth has a stiff texture when sold due to the starch residue. *Adire eleko* is also made by hand-painting the cassava paste designs onto the cloth with feather quills and brushes. These are generally the most detailed and elegant designs. *Adire eleko* rarely appears on the market and each is signed with a symbol from the artist herself. Normally this symbol would be sewn into the hem, however with the upsurge in Nigerian national pride the ancient skills of these village artists are proudly flaunted and their signatures are clearly apparent on the pieces in this exhibition. Hand-painted *adire* are made using traditional designs as well as new inventions of individual women. Traditional designs which have



been painted for many decades include *Ibadadun*; roughly translated this means 'we enjoy Ibadun — the city of Ibadun, and *eyepe* (many birds). Wealthy Yoruba prize these items now, although they are increasingly difficult to obtain. Generally hand-painted batik or *adire eleko* are mid-blue against black-blue. The amount of indigo dye is not as great as the stitched cloths due to delicacy of the fine lines of the applied starch.

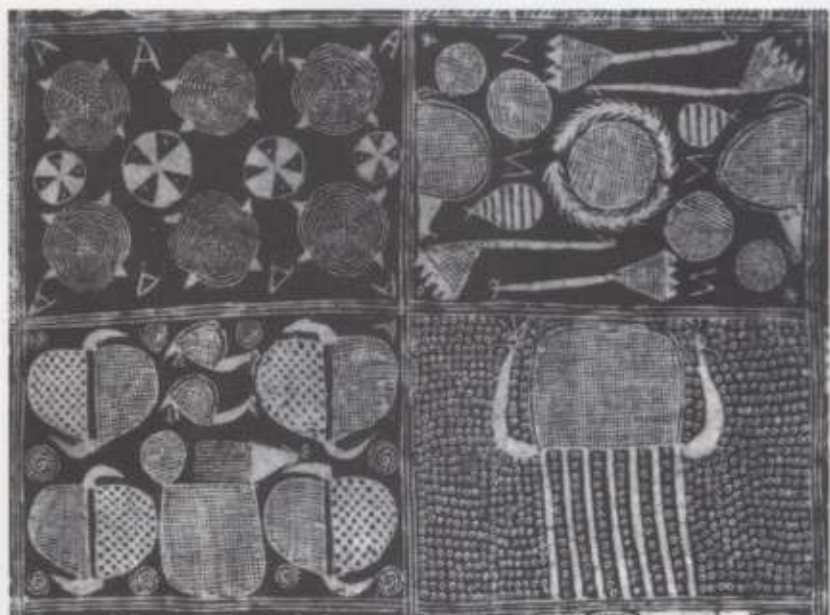
This collection was gathered in 1973 whilst undertaking research studies into traditional village arts at the Institute of African Studies, Ife, Nigeria. Most of the pieces were collected at the itinerant markets held on different days of the month in towns up to 400 km apart. Yoruba market women have been important in the economic structure of Yorubaland for centuries. The market women are a trade union force of exceptional strength although the indigo sellers and the makers of traditional cloths form a small segment of this community. The large markets stretch for up to four blocks in large Yoruba towns. Hand-spun cloths are sold either in strips for making up or in pre-determined widths and lengths for women's head wrappers, skirts and shirts or for men's *agbada* and *danshiki*. The Hausa and Fulani cloths were obtained at the Kano market, one of the most spectacular of West Africa extending for at least a mile in each direction. Products sold range from newly slaughtered horses to trinkets made of plastic and enamel.

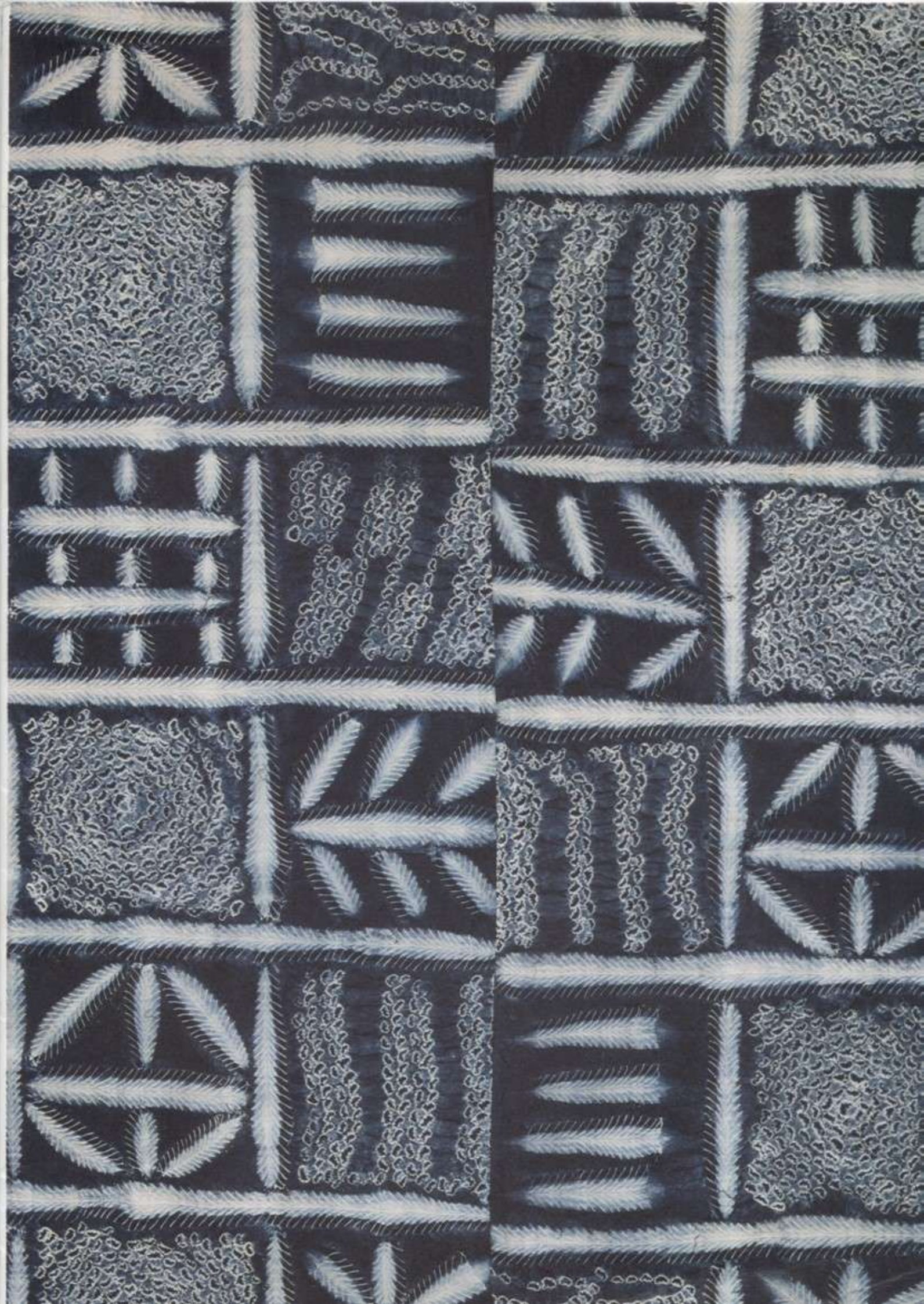
Jennifer Isaacs

Yoruba machine stitched '*adire alabere*'. The tight symmetrical rows of stitching allow no dye to penetrate giving a strongly contrasting pattern of deep indigo against white shirting.

Next page: Yoruba tied and hand stitched '*adire eleko*', Ibadun. Design is known as '*plantain*'. Stitching is raffia.

Yoruba hand painted '*adire eleko*'. Designs are individual combinations of set patterns including kings' umbrellas, spinning tops, many legged birds, wire and birds. The cloth is called '*ibadadun*' or 'we love Ibadun'.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Jennifer Isaacs who was responsible for the concept of the exhibition 'Indigo Textiles — Japan Laos Nigeria'. Jennifer together with Mary Taguchi and Patricia Cheesman have enabled this concept to become a reality. To all three collectors I extend my appreciation for their involvement and assistance with this unique exhibition.

Anne Flanagan



Photographs: Julie Brown
Design: Anne Flanagan
Production: Craft Australia
Printing: Dai Nippon, Japan

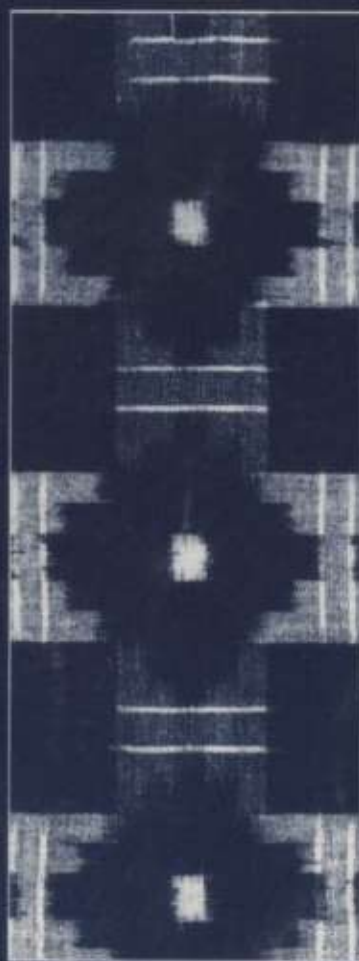
Originally published as a
supplement in *Craft Australia*,
Autumn 1984/1.

ISBN 0 9593919 32

Crafts Council of New South Wales 100, George Street, The Rocks, Sydney.

INDIGO TEXTILES

Japan-Laos-Nigeria



JAPAN



LAOS



NIGERIA

ITINERARY

Tamworth City Art Gallery
Ararat Gallery
Newcastle Regional Art Gallery
Crafts Council Centre Gallery, Western Australia
Crafts Council of A.C.T.